

**Submission
No 119**

**INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND
CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

I am writing in response to the Inquiry's invitation to provide a submission. My comments are variously related to Terms of Reference 1(a) parts (i), (ii), (iii), and (v).

I also draw to the Committee's attention my two submissions made in August 2016 to the previous Inquiry and to the paper ("Evidence of de-skilling at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences") tabled during my giving evidence to the previous inquiry on 12 September 2018.

1. My credentials

1.1 As stated in my evidence to the previous Inquiry, I retired in December 2012 after 33 years' experience as a curator at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum). During this period, I was Senior Curator Transport (1988-2012) and Curator of Transport and Engineering (1980-1988). Since 2012, I have been a volunteer at the Museum, assisting with expert documentation about the transport collection.

1.2 Between 1980 and 1988, I was engaged full time in project management and exhibition development of both Stage I and Stage II of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM).

1.3 Since 2013, I have been a consultant in transport heritage, specialising in significance assessments of individual objects and entire collections and have undertaken commissions from clients in local, state and federal government and from private organisations in Australia and overseas.

1.4 I have experience in curating transport and engineering artefacts of up to 200 tonnes, including how they are provenanced, acquired, researched, handled, managed, interpreted, preserved, operated and promoted; what resources they require and how to manage the associated risks of all the foregoing.

2. Powerhouse Museum: building in relationship with collection (Terms of reference 1 (a) (i), (ii) and (v))

2.1 **From the outset in late 1979 of the original PHM project, there was collaboration between the Government Architect's Branch and the Museum** (and, later, design consultants) to define the vision of the new Museum, **placing the collection at the core of the vision**¹. The architectural approach to the PHM project was to provide spaces that responded flexibly to the vastly differing scale and nature of the Museum's collections. This was done by establishing a clear and hierarchical relationship between the buildings, the exhibition contents and the environments created to best interpret them. For example, the grand volume of the Boiler House would complement the awe-inspiring sweep of suspended aircraft and spacecraft; the preserved cranes and tiled floor of the former Engine House would evoke a former industrial setting of the activated engines of the steam gallery; the diverse perspectives and alluring sight lines of the Turbine House would complement the visual appeal and eclecticism of the social history displays and the intimate exhibition spaces of the

¹ For example, refer *Vision 2000: notes on a new museum* (1979) and "A Power of a Project" in *Steel Profile* No.5 June 1982, pp 10-15

Switch House would enrich the visitor's experience of contemplation and engagement with the stunning decorative arts collection.

The placement of the Boulton & Watt Beam Engine, restored to steaming condition, in the 1988 Galleria and adjacent to the former Engine House gives views through the arches and openings of the Turbine Hall and the Engine House's square windows to the steaming stationary engines of which the Boulton & Watt was the antecedent.

2.2 At the same time, great care was taken to respect the former Power House buildings, despite the loss of so much of the internal structure and finishes from the derelict interior. The architect and the designers worked closely with the Museum to maximise the relationship between building and collection, between exhibit and space and between object and its immediate context. The exhibition design approach, the specification of building services, the relative scale and proportion of exhibits and spaces, considered in a hierarchy, all reflected this integrated process.

2.3 This process demonstrates **the intrinsic inseparability of the Powerhouse Museum buildings from the collection that they house**. It also contrasts starkly with the **astounding lack of consideration of the Museum's collection in the "vision" for the Parramatta Powerhouse project**: documentation made public to date, including the Stage 2 Design brief, reveals that the function of the Museum's rich collection is for little more than window dressing. The most glaring example of this is the proposal for the relocation of the inestimably significant Boulton & Watt beam engine, of which the Stage 2 design brief document tentatively suggests that

There is an opportunity to examine the possibility of placing the Boulton and Watt beam engine on display within one of the circulation spaces in the Museum².

3. Risks to the collection (Term of reference 1 (a) (iii))

3.1 As I stated in evidence to the previous Inquiry, one of the principles about moving museum objects is simple common sense: you don't unless you have to. It's also vital to know what you are dealing with before deciding on a course of action. The Museum's Catalina flying boat is the largest and heaviest object suspended in any museum in the world. Very few museums could accommodate its 33-metre wingspan. Moving it is a highly complex exercise that entails considerable risk of damage.

3.2 **Critical features of PHM for handling and installing large exhibits were level, "at grade" access (meaning the level of the display floor is the same as the approach level) and clear internal building heights** of up to 21 metres. There are many other requirements to minimise the risks of large object handling, not least free space for mobile crane booms and jibs to be extended and swung and unobstructed solid ground to deploy the crane's outriggers. **It defies logic to select a site to "relocate" the PHM that is already seriously compromised by flooding risks and major access issues, thereby knowingly and unnecessarily increasing the costs, complexities and risk factors.**

3.3 In contrast to the existing PHM, "Access and Movement" is addressed in the Stage 2 Design Brief for the proposed new Museum as follows:

Topographic level changes across the site (at Parramatta) will be a significant challenge to delivering universal accessibility...routes for vehicular servicing, emergency vehicle access and flood/emergency egress³

² Refer *Powerhouse Precinct at Parramatta Stage 2 Design Brief* p.107

³ Refer *Powerhouse Precinct at Parramatta Stage 2 Design Brief* p.190

...and presumably access for large object installations.

Furthermore, under “Vehicular access”, the Stage 2 Design Brief advises that the main access to the new Museum site will be via Dirrabarri Lane⁴, which shares access for the residents of and visitors to the Meriton apartment tower. How will this work with deliveries of large objects on low loaders and possibly mobile cranes set up to lift them into the building? Or deliveries to the Museum that may block the road for periods of hours at a time, like travelling exhibitions in containers?

3.3 Level and dedicated site access greatly reduces risks of accident that may cause personal injury and/or damage to the collection, compared with the restricted access and the plainly impractical vertical lifting issues posed by the proposed new Museum’s bizarre building design and the extremely confined site at Parramatta.

4. Burra Charter (Term of reference 1 (a) (v))

4.1 The Government’s stated intentions for the redevelopment of the Ultimo site of the Powerhouse Museum would require the demolition of at least two of the four component buildings of the Powerhouse Museum complex. In 1988, the PHM as a whole was awarded the Sir John Sulman Medal, the highest award from the architecture profession, while the former Tram Depot (now the Harwood Building) was classified by the National Trust of NSW in 1994 as being historically, aesthetically and socially significant. **The proposed demolitions implicit in the Government’s plans for the site contravene at least two tenets of the Burra Charter, which is the basis of all heritage legislation and decision making in Australia⁵.**

4.2 "Article 8. Setting

Conservation requires the retention of an appropriate setting. This includes retention of the visual and sensory setting, as well as the retention of spiritual and other cultural relationships that contribute to the *cultural significance* of the *place*. (not my italics)

New construction, demolition, intrusions or other changes which would adversely affect the setting or relationships are not appropriate. "

Article 8 supports the contention that the entire PHM site as it currently exists holds cultural and heritage significance because of the high level of technological and aesthetic significance of the former Power House buildings and the high social significance of the PHM accrued since its opening in 1988.

4.3 “Article 11. Related places and objects

The contribution which related places and related objects make to the cultural significance of the place should be retained.”

There is a demonstrable and provable relationship between the Museum’s collection types (science and technology, social history and decorative arts), their scale, materials, shapes and stories and the nuanced architectural responses to those collection types. These spacial relationships result from a collaborative process in the design development stage of the PHM. They are most readily illustrated by the arched volume of the galleria, designed specifically to provide a grand setting for the Boulton

⁴ Refer *Powerhouse Precinct at Parramatta Stage 2 Design Brief* p.257

⁵ Refer <https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf>

& Watt engine and the first train in NSW. It is also very evident in the *Steam Revolution* gallery, which evokes the type of industrial setting in which the engines that operate in the exhibition might have once functioned. Furthermore, the *Steam Revolution* exhibition is not just the only gallery of its kind in the state of NSW or Australia, but is still *the only permanent steam-powered museum exhibition in the world*. And make no mistake, the architectural treatment of the former Engine House in which the *Steam Revolution* exhibition is located is not artifice or confection: it is a permanent finish and interpretation of the historical role of that space in the former Ultimo Power House that resonates with its present Museum context.

4.4 Article 11 therefore supports the argument that heritage significance is increased because *the collection itself is integral with the buildings that provide a cultural setting for them*. The overwhelmingly positive and sustained response from millions of visitors to the PHM since 1988 suggests that this relationship between building and collections is one of the key reasons for the broad and enduring appeal of the visitor experience. Therefore, **the proposed changes to the PHM site at Ultimo including the destruction of the Powerhouse Museum in its present form represent a major loss to the heritage and cultural value of Sydney.**

5. Transport and power revolution (Term of reference 1 (a) (v))

5.1 The development of the PHM within the cavernous spaces of the former Ultimo Power House presented a unique opportunity to profile and interpret the Museum's transport and engineering collections in the context of the power technology revolution at the turn of the 20th century that was contemporary with the opening of the Ultimo Power House itself.

5.2 The use of electric power for lighting our cities and propelling our public street transport are two of the many ways in which the Museum's collection has been used to explain the importance of this key development and its effect on daily life. The synergy with the former role of the Power House is obvious and compelling.

6. Powerhouse Museum: promoting the rail preservation movement (Term of reference 1 (a) (v))

6.1 The *Transport and Locomotive No 1* exhibitions developed by the PHM for its 1988 opening dramatically raised the profile of the railway preservation movement in NSW. In 1982, the then State Rail Authority donated the former Central station destination board to the PHM. The destination board was meticulously researched and restored by the PHM, where it has been prominently displayed since 1988, becoming one of the PHM's most iconic and recognised exhibits. In 1986, contracts were signed with the then NSW Rail Transport Museum to restore the PHM's steam locomotive 1243 and steam tram motor 1A for display in the *Transport* exhibition. In 1987, the Sydney Tramway Museum assisted the PHM by providing research information and loan exhibits for the display of the Museum's C Class tram, one of the first that had operated from the Ultimo Depot in 1899.

6.2 In 1992, the Museum entered into a partnership with heritage train operator 3801 Limited to rebuild another PHM locomotive, the mammoth Pacific class No 3830, which was returned to operation in 1997 to haul highly popular steam tours. Meanwhile, volunteers dedicated to rebuilding Sydney steam tram No.103A were invited to use the PHM's steam tram No.1A to take photographs and measurements. No.103A is now part of a group of three steam tram vehicles listed on the State Heritage Register. In 1999, work began to rebuild another of the PHM's steam locomotives, No.3265, which continues to haul heavily patronised heritage steam train tours. In 2005, Rail Corporation NSW (RailCorp), chose to sponsor the redevelopment of the *Locomotive No 1* exhibition as a centrepiece of the 150th anniversary celebrations of the NSW Railways. Locomotive

No.1 has been emblematic of the history of the NSW Railways since its acquisition by the Museum in 1884 and it is internationally significant today. In 2011, the PHM lent its O Class tram to the Sydney Tramway Museum, where it has since attracted great public interest as a static and operating exhibit.

6.3 In his book *Steam Australia: Locomotives That Galvanised the Nation*, the late Tim Fischer is lavish in his praise of the Museum's portrayal of NSW's rail transport heritage. Gazing at Locomotive No 1 is "to behold an icon of rare beauty...that has been well preserved for over 120 years"⁶. He is admiring and reflective about the impressive assemblage of iconic railway exhibits in the *Transport* gallery.

6.4 These examples of the preservation and public enjoyment of the state's rail heritage assets have resulted from the PHM's central role in profiling and promoting our railway history through its collection, its exhibitions and the preserved railway and tramway architecture included in the Powerhouse Museum complex. This is clear evidence that social significance may be attributed to the totality of the Museum, its transport exhibitions and exhibits as a single entity. This is clear evidence that **the loss of the PHM in its present form would represent a major loss to the heritage and cultural value of Ultimo, Sydney and the State of New South Wales.**

Yours faithfully

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⁶ Fischer, T, *Steam Australia: Locomotives That Galvanised the Nation*, NLA Publishing, Canberra, 2018, p 108